

# Otis squad's mission completed, for now

■ About 1,700 of the 3,000 Massachusetts guardsmen deployed for the Iraq war are still overseas.

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STAFF WRITER

**O**TIS AIR BASE — Across the runway, 8-year-old Paige Wunder spotted her dad stepping off the cargo plane, four months after another plane had taken him to the Middle East.

Dressed in desert fatigues and a backpack, Maj. Art Wunder of Mashpee walked toward his waiting family, but his daughter didn't want to wait.

She sprinted across the flight line into her father's arms and, for a few minutes, it didn't look like she'd ever let go.

"She just couldn't believe he was here. We all couldn't believe he was coming home," said Wunder's wife, Beth. "Until we saw him, we weren't going to believe he was on that plane."

Weeks after they learned their mission in the deserts of Jordan was coming to an end — and two weeks after 33 colleagues returned to the United States — leaders of the 267th Combat Communications squadron finally arrived at Otis Air National Guard base yesterday.

It was a far different scene than the frigid January morning when the squadron, which sets up and maintains communication lines, left Otis.

At that time, war clouds were gathering, and American soldiers were massing around Iraq's border.



LT. COL. DAN EPRIGHT/USAF

**Maj. Art Wunder of Mashpee returned from Iraq yesterday. He said he's looking forward to catching up with his family, including daughter Paige, above. "I'm amazed at how much they change over a couple of months."**

The Cape-based combat communications specialists, most of whom had just returned from another seven-month overseas deployment, had no idea how long they'd be overseas.

The 267th, which has about 200 members based at Otis, helps set up communications networks, making sure military personnel have access to the voice mail,

e-mail, long-distance and classified lines they have at their home bases.

After the bombing of Iraq began, members of the 267th were out of contact with family for at least a month.

It wasn't until soldiers began to roll into Baghdad in early April that people started to see the mission was nearing an end.

For the most part, the squadron's work was done by late April, said Maj. Gen. George Keefe, adjutant general for the Massachusetts National Guard. But with thousands of soldiers returning, it was sometimes difficult to coordinate the flights back to the United States.

Now that they're home, Wunder said his squadron is ready to spend some time here. He said he's looking forward to catching up with his wife and three children, ages 4, 8 and 10.

"I don't know if you can ever recoup the time lost. It's just making the most of the time we have now," he said. "I'm amazed at how much they change over a couple of months. Just being able to spend some family time together, I'm looking forward to it. It's going to be good to have the summer together."

Three more members of the squadron, who are now in Iraq, will return to the United States in mid-July, Keefe said.

Now, only about 1,700 Massachusetts guardsmen remain overseas, down from more than 3,000 at the height of the war.

More will be called as part of the war on terror, Keefe predicted.

"It's not the end of sending kids away. There will be more soldiers deployed," he said. "But we're slowly turning it around."